



**Claire McCaskill**

United States Senator

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Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 Medical Centers  
John J. Pershing VA Medical Center

# Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

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Report No: 2017 – PB – 03



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<http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov>



### **Poplar Bluff Region Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program**

Since arriving in the United States Senate, Senator Claire McCaskill has made keeping our nation's promises to veterans one of her highest priorities. As the daughter of a World War II veteran, Claire knows the vital sacrifices that veterans have made for the security of our country and in defense of our core values and freedoms. In return for their service, she believes that our country owes veterans a sacred debt of gratitude, which includes access to safe, quality, reliable medical care through our U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system of hospitals and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), both in Missouri and across the country.

Following a series of highly-publicized incidents in 2010 which called into question the high standard of care provided by the St. Louis VA Medical Center – John Cochran Division, Claire reached out to Missouri veterans and VA administrators to address the erosion of confidence in the overall quality of care and customer service at John Cochran VA Medical Center. Although many veterans reported positive experiences with the medical care at John Cochran, concerns persisted among veterans with the customer service they received at the Center and, to a lesser extent, other VA medical facilities in Missouri. In response, Claire announced plans for a “secret shopper” program for veterans—formally named the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program—to rate the quality of service at Missouri VA facilities and to provide the VA with targeted, helpful feedback about veterans' positive and negative experiences at the VA medical centers.

Following the announcement of the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program, Claire and her staff collaborated with leaders from various Missouri veterans' organizations and VA administrators to shape the program. Through this collaboration, a constructive, confidential survey was developed that would be useful to the VA medical centers and act as an independent resource for veterans to make recommendations. The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program acts as an independent, transparent voice for veterans. It has three major goals:

- (1) Improve communications between veterans and VA medical center personnel;
- (2) Improve overall customer service ratings of VA medical centers in Missouri; and
- (3) Improve the willingness of veterans to positively recommend Missouri VA medical facilities to other veterans.

This report represents the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the Poplar Bluff region facilities and includes a continuing compilation of survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



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CLAIRE McCASKILL  
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## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 26, 2017

To the Director of the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center,  
Members of the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Poplar Bluff Region. After reviewing the responses from this round of surveys, I am encouraged by the commitment of both Missouri veterans and VA officials in the Poplar Bluff region to come together for the sake of improving veterans' experiences at VA facilities. I recognize the Poplar Bluff VA's ongoing efforts to address issues regarding healthcare and customer service quality, and I hope that current and future leadership use the feedback contained in this report to identify priorities for improved customer service.

When I first proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I would not be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. I mean it as much now as I did then. Today, I am pleased that more and more veterans are telling me how the Poplar Bluff VA has changed for the better in recent years—how attitudes have improved; how respect shown is greater; how cleanliness and scheduling efficiency have increased. These are performance markers to be proud of, but there is still more work to do. The report suggests veterans' experiences at the VA are dramatically improving in several categories; however, we must be careful to avoid drawing too strong a conclusion based on the number of responses. Looking ahead, it is important that we keep the momentum growing that we have established over the last few years with the robust participation among our veterans. We must sustain this timely, transparent process to ensure our veterans are satisfied with their VA health care experience. To that end, I have instructed my staff to continue working with the veterans' organizations in executing a robust outreach strategy to promote even greater participation.

I remain appreciative of the hard work and professionalism shown by the VA administrators, employees and staff. I know they are committed, as I am, to ensuring that veterans have a positive experience while at Missouri VA medical centers. I am proud of their willingness to implement many of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Reports. It appears that the leadership at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center recognize their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and I appreciate their commitment to responding to the concerns expressed to me in these surveys within 30 days.

Additionally, I am grateful for the help and support of my partners at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center and several Missouri veterans' organizations. However, most importantly, I am grateful to our veterans for their service, sacrifice and support for the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. Together we *can* and *will* improve the quality of customer care in Missouri VA medical facilities, starting right here in Poplar Bluff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Claire McCaskill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and "M".

Claire McCaskill  
United States Senator

The following members of my staff participated in the preparation of this report:

Justin Klocke  
Christy Mercer  
Cindy Hall  
Nick Rawls  
Allyson LeBlanc

**Would you like your voice heard?**

Veterans can complete a survey of their current experience at a VA facility at:  
<http://mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp/>.



## **REPORT**

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) survey for the Poplar Bluff region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans raising specific concerns about their care or benefits were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about John J. Pershing VA Medical Centers and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as Poplar Bluff VA or VA facilities) through the period ending April 9, 2017. Comments received after that period will be reviewed in the next Summary Report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center; and
- Issue a public report of the survey conclusions and resolutions of any identified issues.

Our methodology included reviewing responses submitted on the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program surveys, identifying any specific urgent issues and working directly with the veteran to get an immediate response from the VA and submitting other concerns identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program to the VA. Some of the veterans elected not to take immediate action regarding issues identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey.

Prior to the issuance of the report, representatives of various veterans' service organizations reviewed the Summary Report and made recommendations for suggested improvements at the VA facilities. Their comments and recommendations have been incorporated in this report.

The VA has provided responses to all recommendations.



### SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) oversees the largest healthcare system in the nation through a network of 18 Veterans Integrated Service Networks. Missouri is mostly comprised in Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 with a large portion of Southwestern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 and small portions of Northern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 23. In order for the VA to gauge the satisfaction of veterans receiving care at individual VA medical centers, the VA established the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients in 2002. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients was designed to consolidate multiple VA health care survey programs into a single program that collects data on both inpatient and outpatient experiences of veterans at a VA medical center. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients focuses on the quality of care.

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Claire's office, veteran leaders and the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center worked together to develop an independent survey to serve as a resource veterans can use to make recommendations to each individual VA medical center regarding the quality of customer service.

#### Scope

The scope of this review included, but was not necessarily limited to, those VA facilities located in the Poplar Bluff region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 9, 2017. In the Poplar Bluff region, sixty-nine (69) responses were received during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

- Completed surveys collected from veterans who received care at a VA facility.
- Communications with and information received from representatives from the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

#### Methodology

During our review, a database established by and internal to the senate office was used to accumulate results and compile data in tabulated form. In instances where veterans reported the need for immediate or urgent assistance in response to their case, additional information was gathered so the VA could respond immediately to their needs.

Survey questionnaires were available through veterans' service organizations, from VA patient representatives and online at [www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp](http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp). Veterans self-reported their

customer service experience at the VA facility either directly online or by submitting a written survey to a veterans' service organization or to Claire's office that was then entered into the database.

All survey responses, not including any identifying respondent information, were provided to the VA. In addition, all survey responses were reviewed independently by representatives of the veterans' service organizations. Specific comments were selected to be included in the report based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the statement. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken into consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments either not having as significant a level of relevance to the statement offered or missing key information to draw a conclusion.

### **Limitations**

Data presented are compiled from survey information submitted voluntarily by veterans. The comments included were obtained directly from the surveys or from veterans' service organization representatives. These comments were not verified by the senate office through additional procedures for accuracy, validity or completeness.

This is not meant to be a scientifically-constructed study.





### OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

#### Background

This Summary Report covers the period ending April 9, 2017. During this period, sixty-nine (69) survey responses were received in the Poplar Bluff region. In the survey, veterans reported the era that they served. All eras of veterans from World War II to present day were represented with Vietnam era veterans comprising over sixty-two percent (62.3%) of the respondents. Some veterans indicated they served in multiple eras of service. Below is a table which details the service eras of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	2.9%
Korean War	2.9%
Vietnam War	62.3%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	14.5%
Iraq/Afghanistan	13.0%
Other	14.4%

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their gender. Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	92.8%
Female	7.2%

In the survey, over fifty-two percent (52.2%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center. Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

John J. Pershing VA Medical Center	52.2%
Cape Girardeau CBOC	18.8%

Farmington CBOC	13.0%
Paragould, AR CBOC	0.0%
Sikeston CBOC	10.1%
West Plains CBOC	11.6%
Other	1.4%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center. Sixty-nine (69) responses indicated that veterans utilized services from the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	36.2%	Emergency Room	8.7%	Extended Care	1.4%
Outpatient Clinic	23.2%	Mental Health Services	8.7%	Dental	4.3%
Pharmacy	8.7%	X-Ray	10.1%	Laboratory	31.9%
Travel/Enrollment	7.2%	Main Lobby	20.3%	Specialist Visit	10.1%
Inpatient Care	1.4%	Women's Clinic	1.4%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	0.0%
Prosthetics	2.9%	Podiatry	0.0%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	0.0%
Claim & Pension Exam	4.3%	Other	15.9% (examples: Surgery, Cardiology, etc.)		

## **Review of survey question results**

This section summarizes the results of each of the survey statements. Results from the most recent survey (R3) are marked “current,” and results from previous surveys (R1 – R2) are also included.

### **1. Ease of scheduling appointments**

The reported ease of scheduling appointments at a VA facility has declined slightly for this round of surveys; concerns were noted.

**I was able to schedule my appointment easily.**

	<b>R3 (current)</b>	<b>R2</b>	<b>R1</b>
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	52.2%	47.7%	44.4%
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	15.9%	24.6%	17.8%
<b>Neutral:</b>	18.8%	9.2%	11.1%
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	2.9%	4.6%	7.8%
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	10.1%	13.8%	18.9%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this statement with 47 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. Veterans who indicated having trouble with making appointments continued to state most of their issues were with scheduling appointments over the phone and being unable to reach VA support staff who could schedule an appointment. A few veterans expressed concern with the distance they had to travel to clinics.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Although I was able to get in quickly, I was required to drive 120 miles to get a CT scan.”*
- *“I called and asked for an appointment and was given an available day and time that was within a few days of my calling.”*
- *“You can’t call the clinic directly. You have to call Poplar Bluff and it takes approximately 30 minutes to just make an appointment.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue to work on promoting the benefits of the new call center and be patient as veterans adjust to the new system which is a positive technological step forward. Hopefully, this will significantly improve the already positive impacts seen in the “strongly agree” numbers above.

## VA Medical Center's Response:

*The Poplar Bluff VAMC will continue promoting the benefits of the new call center, which is decreasing the dropped call rate and decreasing the average speed to answer rate. The call abandonment rate has dropped from 13.9% in July of 2016 to 4.84% in March of 2017 (goal is less than 5%). In addition, the average speed to answer dropped from 36 seconds in July of 2016 to 20 seconds in March of 2017 (goal is less than 30 seconds). We are also proud to provide same-day access when care is needed quickly. In June of 2017, a new scheduling feature will incorporate requests for Choice appointments to seamlessly meld our processes and facilitate coordination.*

### 2. Ease of access to the appointment location at the facility

This survey period, veterans indicated greater satisfaction with their ability to easily navigate the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region in order to find the location of their appointments.

**I was able to find my way to my appointment easily.**

	<b>R3 (current)</b>	<b>R2</b>	<b>R1</b>
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	73.9%	58.5%	65.6%
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	11.6%	23.1%	11.1%
<b>Neutral:</b>	10.1%	10.8%	8.9%
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	1.4%	1.5%	2.2%
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	2.9%	6.2%	12.2%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this statement with 59 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. The continued improvement in veterans being able to navigate the VA facilities is a strong sign that the VA has taken the necessary steps to help ensure that veterans find their appointment locations quickly and easily.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Building signage is good. If I paused to look at a sign, someone would offer to help me find my way."*
- *"I have been complaining for 20 years about the lack of directories around the elevators. Having these for sick people is just common sense."*
- *"The new signs are a huge improvement, and someone will help you if you look lost."*

**Recommendation:** Ensure that all interior and exterior signage is updated to reflect current changes due to construction. Consider printing directories and campus maps so that veterans can find their appointments quickly and efficiently. Installing campus maps could relieve the challenge for those veterans who possibly have poor eye sight or difficulty reading.

## VA Medical Center's Response:

*Interior and exterior signage was replaced last year, which likely explains the favorable response increase. Digital wayfinding aids at the elevators also provide a map and interactive assistance. In addition, facility staff are to be commended for their willingness to escort patients and visitors to the location they seek.*

### 3. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans reported far greater satisfaction with the cleanliness of the VA facilities during this survey period.

**At the time of my visit, the VA facility was clean.**

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	69.6%	52.3%	53.3%
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	21.7%	26.1%	25.6%
<b>Neutral:</b>	5.8%	18.4%	12.2%
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	2.9%	0.0%	2.2%
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	0.0%	3.1%	6.7%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this statement with 63 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region were clean. Two (2) veterans mostly disagreed that the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region were clean.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The VA facility was very clean and neat upon my visit. It is always meticulously taken care of every time I go, and there is a lot of traffic there so that must be a very hard job that is done very well.”*
- *“The Housekeeping Department is top-notch. The Poplar Bluff VA is excellent – one of the cleanest VA hospitals anywhere.”*
- *“I noted no unclean situation, and the staff provided a coughing patient with a face mask.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue current efforts to ensure that Environmental Management Service staff maintain their frequent monitoring of high-traffic areas and are notified as soon as a visitor notices evidence of uncleanliness or obstructions to an area. Additionally, it is appropriate to recognize the good work the Environmental Management Service is doing based on the survey results from our veterans.

## VA Medical Center's Response:

*The Poplar Bluff VAMC takes great pride in the cleanliness of its facility. Environmental Management will be recognized by facility leadership for the results of this survey.*

### 4. Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment

Satisfaction with wait times has improved considerably since the last survey period. The percentage of veterans expressing that they were not seen by their provider in a reasonable amount of time declined, while the percentage of veterans expressing that they were seen in a reasonable amount of time increased.

**From the date I initially requested the appointment, I was able to be seen by my provider in a reasonable amount of time.**

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	55.1%	41.5%	47.8%
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	17.4%	18.5%	13.3%
<b>Neutral:</b>	14.5%	9.2%	8.9%
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	5.8%	3.1%	7.8%
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	7.2%	27.7%	22.2%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this statement with 50 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to see their provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait longer than they thought was necessary.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Most of the time I get in within a week or two, but sometimes I will wait a month."*
- *"I was told I could only see my primary care physician every six months. It has been almost a year since I have seen a regular primary care physician."*
- *"If you call to make an appointment, you're told it will be 6 to 9 months before they can get you in."*

**Recommendation:** Continue current efforts to ensure that staff vacancies are filled in a timely manner to reduce wait times and improve patient access. Ensure that patients' scheduling requests are responded to in 1 to 3 days from point of contact.

## VA Medical Center's Response:

*The Poplar Bluff VAMC and Veteran Committee recommend the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Survey add an optional "contact me about my concern" space in the survey. The "6 to 9 months" reference above needs explanation and follow-up, as we currently have an average wait time of 4 days in Primary Care and can provide same-day access if the need is immediate. We continue to fill staff vacancies in a timely manner and believe we do respond to patients' requests for appointments within 1-3 days, although there is no way to track that information in our system.*

### 5. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

Historically, poor communication between patients and VA personnel has been the main reason veterans and their families contact the senate office. While some veterans are still having difficulty communicating with VA staff, the data continues to show great improvement as a larger percentage of veterans reported positive communication exchanges. However, the data shows that more progress is needed with regard to communication.

**VA staff communicated well with me and clearly explained what was going on.**

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	59.4%	40.0%	48.9%
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	11.6%	21.5%	14.4%
<b>Neutral:</b>	11.6%	12.3%	11.1%
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	8.7%	10.7%	11.1%
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	9.8%	15.4%	14.4%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this statement with 49 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication experiences with VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Once again, they are too busy to stop and explain what is going on."*
- *"I was given written instructions after a one-on-one meeting and later contacted by phone to review instructions and answer any questions."*
- *"Communication is horrible. VA feels it is okay to claim you said something when you didn't, then they feel it necessary to place that in your medical files. They never read your file, which is evident by them consistently sending you for the same exams over and over again and not reviewing the results when they are completed."*

**Recommendation:** Continue to improve communication best practices between medical staff and patients; urging staff to listen to patient concerns and provide complete answers to their questions regarding care.

**VA Medical Center's Response:**

*The Poplar Bluff VAMC has been conducting "Motivational Interviewing" (MI) training with clinical staff; four MI trainings have been completed already in 2017. Motivational Interviewing is a technique of communicating with Veterans in a way that helps them find their own motivation to make behavior changes to improve their help – this training gets at the heart of listening to patients' concerns. Care teams also complete follow-up phone calls when Veterans are discharged from hospital stays, allow extra time in appointments for Veteran/provider discussions, and promote a robust Secure Messaging program for Veterans to contact their teams via electronic message.*

**6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility**

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction. Accordingly, the data suggests that a strong majority of veterans were pleased with the VA's healthcare efficiency.

**I was able to get the care I needed during my visit.**

	<b>R3 (current)</b>	<b>R2</b>	<b>R1</b>
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	60.9%	43.0%	51.1%
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	11.6%	13.8%	20.0%
<b>Neutral:</b>	8.7%	9.2%	6.7%
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	5.8%	4.6%	8.9%
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	13.0%	29.3%	13.3%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this statement with 50 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. Most of the concerns expressed by veterans related to communication between the veteran and their provider, and to delays in follow up with the veteran after an appointment.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Nurses were very attentive and did all they could to make me comfortable."*
- *"I have had better care with the VA than when I used private insurance."*
- *"Physician was great. However, I needed a medication not in system. When it was requested, pharmacy would not fill. They sent a medication that I had previously been allergic to."*

**Recommendation:** Realizing that staff turnover forces veterans to establish new relationships with providers on a regular basis, emphasize the importance of staff taking the time to listen to their



patients' concerns. Let veterans know that their feedback is not only valued, but it is vital to their quality of care and success of treatment.

### VA Medical Center's Response:

*At the Poplar Bluff VMAC, we understand that quality staff members are vital to providing excellent clinical care. Therefore, we track staff turnover as a performance measure, and adjust our practices accordingly. Currently our retention rate is 99.04%. We also know that patient relationships with their providers are an important part of the health care process. With that in mind, we place high priority on patient feedback and— as individuals and as an organization — listen to patient concerns. This may occur in the clinical care environment, through the quarterly town halls hosted by the facility, or with analysis (and associated action plans) of SHEP data.*

### 7. Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

The reported respect shown at Pershing VA facilities has increased sharply. Over eighty-four (84.1%) percent of the responses received reported respectful interactions between veterans and staff at Poplar Bluff VA facilities.

#### I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	69.6%	47.7%	56.7%
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	14.5%	20.0%	17.8%
<b>Neutral:</b>	7.2%	9.2%	7.8%
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	2.9%	3.1%	5.6%
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	5.8%	20.0%	12.2%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this statement with 58 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. The data suggests that current VA initiatives regarding employee customer service training such as "I CARE" are working as intended. However, veterans still reported that support staff in some instances seemed rude and disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"From 2006 to this point, it's incredible how much the VA has improved. I am thankful we have the VA and they're constantly trying to make things better."*
- *"Nursing and clerical staff are always very respectful and helpful. The doctor made a comment during the procedure which I interpreted to be disrespectful toward me."*

- *“I see too many vets and their loved ones walk away without getting care due to supervisors allowing rude and cold-hearted clerks to remain in positions where they are able to mistreat the veterans. It breaks my heart to see vets walk away with a hanging shaking head.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue efforts to educate all VA staff on the importance placed in “*I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics*.” Those employees who best display *I CARE* values deserve to be properly recognized, and those employees identified as lacking should receive additional guidance.

#### **VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*Staff exhibiting our ICARE values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence are recognized almost daily in our morning supervisory meeting. Approximately 140 ICARE certificates were awarded in 2016; staff are often nominated by their peers, colleagues, and even patients. Our facility continually seeks to demonstrate respect for Veterans. For example, when World War II Veterans’ funeral processions pass by the medical center, staff line the road with flags as a way of honoring and respecting that Veteran’s contribution. In addition, our VSO meetings, our town hall meetings, and our involvement in various Veterans’ activities in our communities demonstrate our respect for and commitment to our Veterans. This is how we identify and address opportunities for improvement in our services to Veterans. Last year, 100% of staff members were trained/refreshed in VA’s ICARE values.*

#### **8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans**

The data suggests that veterans are now more inclined than ever to positively recommend Poplar Bluff region VA facilities to other veterans. Since the first Summary Report, willingness to recommend Poplar Bluff VA facilities has grown from 62.2% (R1) to 58.4% (R2) to 73.9% (R3).

#### **I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.**

	<b>R3 (current)</b>	<b>R2</b>	<b>R1</b>
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	53.6%	44.6%	52.2%
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	20.3%	13.8%	10.0%
<b>Neutral:</b>	8.7%	12.3%	13.3%
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	7.2%	13.8%	5.6%
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	10.1%	15.4%	18.9%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this statement with 51 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region to other veterans. However, concerns were noted.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *“Despite the national issues, this facility has served me well. That is why I choose to travel two hours to use the facility.”*
- *“I have no problems recommending the VA. More and more Veterans tell me they would recommend the VA.”*
- *“I have always been seen in a timely manner and been treated cordially and with respect.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“I have told some fellow veterans to use the VA. Some would hesitate because they didn't want to take time from vets who needed treatment more. I felt the same way. I met a nurse who gave me quite a talking to about not using the VA.”*
- *“I would not recommend any VA facility to anyone.”*
- *“I wouldn't recommend the VA to anyone unless they can't afford outside treatment (I have to use them because I can't afford to go elsewhere). To be honest, the VA doesn't care in the least for the veterans they're supposed to be serving.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue present efforts that give high quality of care and customer service priority of place in the Poplar Bluff VA Healthcare System.

#### **VA Medical Center's Response:**

*Quality care and customer service are among our top priorities at the Poplar Bluff VAMC. We continually measure and monitor our care indicators, and are always looking to improve our processes. In addition, we are proud to be transparent on our quality and access measures, which are available for view by the general public at [accesstocare.va.gov](https://www.accesstocare.va.gov).*

#### **9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse**

A veteran's confidence in his/her personal doctor or nurse is key to evaluating overall customer service experience. For this survey period, veterans' satisfaction with their physician or nurse has increased. The data suggests that medical staff are working hard to improve veterans' health care experiences.

### How would you rate your overall experience with your personal doctor or nurse?

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
<b>Excellent:</b>	55.1%	41.5%	40.0%
<b>Above Average (Good):</b>	13.0%	18.5%	16.7%
<b>Average/Fair:</b>	14.5%	15.3%	18.9%
<b>Below Average:</b>	10.1%	6.2%	8.9%
<b>Poor:</b>	7.2%	18.5%	15.6%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this question with 47 reporting “Excellent” or “Above Average” experiences with their personal doctor or nurse. Veterans who described positive experiences frequently commented on clear and empathetic communication. Conversely, veterans who expressed dissatisfaction with their personal doctor/nurse had several different reasons for their responses, including: poor follow-up, communication, workload, and professionalism.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“She was communicative, explained clearly what was being done, and was pleasant and respectful.”*
- *“Physician was very attentive to my needs. However, in my experience, physicians have too many patients. This physician mentioned this to me as well.”*
- *“Rude and very uncaring. Doesn't want to listen to anything this veteran had to say. How can you treat a vet if you don't listen?”*

**Recommendation:** Continue to recognize those staff members who demonstrate outstanding care to veterans, while providing guidance for staff who need development and support.

### VA Medical Center’s Response:

*Through a variety of means (ICARE certificates, performance evaluations, employee town hall meetings, all employee emails, employee of the month, the morning supervisory meeting, and “Director’s Discussion” meetings) the Poplar Bluff VAMC makes every effort to promote a culture of safety, respect, and customer service to our team members.*

## 10. Overall experience at the VA facility

Since the last report, satisfaction with overall experience at Poplar Bluff VA facilities has increased slightly. Similarly, the level of dissatisfaction has decreased over 10% since the last report. Thus, the data suggests that the VA Medical Center’s continued focus on respect and communication through the “I-CARE” Program appears to be improving veterans’ overall experiences.

### How would you rate your overall experience with the VA Medical Centers?

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
<b>Excellent:</b>	34.8%	27.7%	33.3%
<b>Above Average (Good):</b>	26.1%	32.3%	23.3%
<b>Average/Fair:</b>	18.8%	7.7%	16.7%
<b>Below Average:</b>	7.2%	10.8%	10.0%
<b>Poor:</b>	13.0%	21.6%	16.7%

Sixty-nine (69) responses were received to this question with 42 indicating “Excellent” or “Above Average” overall experiences at Poplar Bluff VA facilities; fourteen (14) reported “Below Average” or “Poor” overall experience.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The clinic has been a true partner in keeping me healthy. I started visiting the clinic 5 years ago when it was in the old location; and my VA doctor accurately diagnosed a serious condition and helped me turn my health around. Now, my health is pretty good for a young man of 94; and the local clinic monitors my health with lab work and 6-month visits with my VA physician and occasional help in-between.”*
- *“The automated pharmacy call-in line to refill prescriptions is easy to use. My daughter has been using this service for 5 years with great success.”*
- *“If the VA cannot treat us in a timely manner or refuse to provide referrals, they should permit us to use outside sources and the VA accept the financial responsibility.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue to build on improvements with patient experience by implementing recommendations found in the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) and VA Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patient (SHEP). Ensure that stakeholder feedback and veterans’ concerns are at the forefront of all efforts by the Poplar Bluff VA Healthcare System.

### VA Medical Center’s Response:

*The Poplar Bluff VAMC hosts quarterly town halls, analyzes SHEP and VCSP data, holds monthly VSO meetings, has created a Community Veterans Engagement Board, analyzes feedback from patients requesting congressional inquiries, and even provides a social media page for Veterans to provide real-time feedback. We are committed to receiving and addressing stakeholder feedback in every possible venue.*



### VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The current Summary Report discloses various issues regarding the customer service received by veterans and other matters as presented below. This section summarizes the recommendations that veterans have made to improve the VA facility they visited. Most of the recommendations from veterans referenced the same issues outlined throughout this report.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"A program that allows the Veteran to choose which civilian doctor to see without having to get permission before you can go and see them."*
- *"Doctors need to see patients within a reasonable amount of time. Leave animals out of the building."*
- *"Staffing is a problem. The doctors are over-booked, so they are not able to take care of patients as we should be taken care of."*
- *"Better communication with the patients. Doctors actually being there during scheduled hours."*
- *"Less replication of services and more cooperation between departments."*
- *"Allow us to call directly to the clinic we need to see. Sometimes the clinic can work a patient in and not have to wait a month to be seen."*
- *"Referrals were never put in, therefore restricting me from the treatment I need. So I am simply in limbo, can't be seen in mental health, can't stand to be around people and am extremely upset as to the way the VA treats me and others."*
- *"Improve the facilities for disabled vets."*
- *"Open up more CBOCs to reduce travel for us."*
- *Ability to fire employees and hold them accountable, more medication options; have an option to see private physician if I can't get an appointment in timely manner."*



### RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

#### **Which provider or department that does an excellent job do you want Senator McCaskill to know about?**

There are many great professionals working in the Poplar Bluff region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. Fifty-one (51) responses were received to this question acknowledging veterans' appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region.

Below are sample responses from veterans. At the request of the VA, employees' names were replaced with their initials to protect their privacy. All responses, in full, were provided to the VA Administration to alert them to employees who were singled out for their professionalism and performance:

- *"CB, (Farmington out-patient clinic), is the top of the list. I believe that she knows every person that walks through the door. She goes out of her way to make your visit seem like she really cares about you."*
- *"The front lobby staff is excellent. When they do their job well, they help you easily navigate all the services of the local clinic and Poplar Bluff. I deal with the lady who schedules for Dr. TB. I know a thing or two about serving the public; and, listen, they don't come any better. Courtesy, efficiency, complete knowledge of the system."*
- *"I have been pleased with all of the services my father has received since starting with VA medical services in Farmington & Poplar Bluff. The staff have excellent customer service skills and everyone seems to have a good knowledge base of their jobs/specialty services. In particular, the x-ray/radiology department is wonderful."*
- *"Dr. C and the staff at the VA Clinic in Farmington provide excellent care and service. Always friendly and ready to serve in what every capacity they can."*
- *"The lab Folks at the lab are very friendly, courteous, and professional. Have never been a problem with their services."*
- *"The social worker is very caring and has visited my home and assessed what my needs are and has worked to make it easier for me to remain at home."*
- *"The Sikeston COBC Lab Technician is excellent and pleasant to deal with as well as the X-Ray Department at the Poplar Bluff VA."*

**Recommendation:** The men and women of the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center provide superior levels of care for our nation's veterans. Their dedication, compassion, and professionalism deserve our praise and respect; efforts should continue to recognize those who best represent the Poplar Bluff VA Healthcare System.

**VA Medical Center's Response:**

*We are proud to practice daily recognition of employees who exhibit our ICARE values in our Morning Report through ICARE certificates and other special individual or group recognition opportunities.*





## FOLLOW UP ON VA MEDICAL CENTER'S RESPONSES

Since the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center agreed to act on a number of the recommendations outlined in the previous reports, or they were already taking action on some of the concerns mentioned in the summary. This section reports the status of the implementation of those commitments.

### **Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment**

In the second Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center hired seven (7) physicians, two (2) dentists, and a total of nine-one (91) employees over the last year. We use a variety of measures and data collection to closely monitor our wait times in all clinics and make adjustments to better meet the needs of our Veterans. Through fiscal year 15, we operated extended (evening) hours and Saturday clinics in primary care. Filling provider vacancies is always a priority at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, though physician recruitment in our rural area continues to present challenges for our facility. One of our strategies for addressing these challenges is to leverage community providers through Veterans Choice and non-VA options to reduce wait times,"* in response to veterans' concerns about personnel shortages as it related to apparent delays in scheduling appointments. What is the current status on the number of vacancies at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center, and what steps are being taken to improve the recruiting and hiring process?

### **VA Medical Center's Response:**

*The Poplar Bluff VAMC currently has 68 vacancies – 17 of which have selectees in the pre-employment process. Four of the vacancies are for physicians/psychiatrists and active recruitment is underway. From May 2016 to May 2017, we recruited and filled 91 vacancies – 64 of which were for clinical positions. Vacancies required approximately 60 days to fill, including a required 15-day open period. The Poplar Bluff VAMC continually tracks, evaluates, and seeks to improve the recruitment and selection process. For example, we partnered with a national recruiter to fill our provider vacancies. Our HR office is short-staffed at this time, but now that the hiring freeze has lifted, we will take aggressive action to fill those vacancies.*

### **Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility**

In the second Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"Patient-centered care remains a priority at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, and regular communication training and customer service reminder messages help keep these values in the forefront of staff minds; however, we can never rest when it comes to communication and*

*patient-centered care, and will continue to stress these values to our staff. Our executive leadership team and supervisors regularly “round for outcomes” throughout the hospital and clinics. Facility leadership also meets monthly with Veteran Service Officers and other key stakeholders to share information and obtain feedback. Additional advisory groups sponsored by Voluntary Service, Mental Health, Women’s Health, and Caregiver Support provide feedback on medical center services,” in regard to recommendations made to improve communication by the VA staff with the veteran. What is the current status of the shared decision-making initiative as it relates to improving the quality of communication between veterans and medical staff?*

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*We have taken a number of steps to better hear our Veterans’ voices, including establishment of a Community Veterans Engagement Board, our continued robust Veterans Service Officers monthly meeting, our town hall meetings (with an average of 300 attending), our social media site, and Secure Messaging. The advisory groups for Voluntary Service, Mental Health, Women’s Health and Caregiver Support continue as valuable feedback collection venues. Our facility leadership also makes it a practice to be available to hear Veterans’ concerns on a regular basis.*

**Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility**

In the second Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, “Respect is one of Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center’s I CARE values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence); and we train frequently on the importance of respecting Veterans. All employees are required to annually reaffirm their commitment to I CARE values. Regular messages go out to staff about respect and I CARE, and special certificates are presented in staff meetings to those who model those values. Staff also utilizes their supervisors and the Patient Advocate to help resolve issues when patients are not satisfied.” How are these engagement efforts enhancing the culture of respect within Poplar Bluff VA, and what other types of initiatives have been established to maintain the veteran at the center of all decision-making at the VA?

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*Perhaps the best way to respond is with a quote from one of our social media comments.*

*“Over the years, I have taken my Veteran father to the John J. Pershing VAMC where he has received great care. He has utilized many services including the ER, pharmacy, lab, x-ray and his primary doctor is in house. He has always received prompt and thorough treatment throughout the clinic. I have witnessed employees saying, ‘Please, thank you, yes sir, no sir and thank you for your service’ many times. When entering the building, I feel a sense of pride and patriotism not only from the red, white and blue displayed but by faithful caring employees. My parents and I are thankful for an outstanding VA facility.”*

*We believe our culture of respect is enhanced through new employee orientation, regular training, supportive leadership, and stress of our ICARE values. As mentioned above, we take advantage of every opportunity to gather feedback from those we serve, and adjust our practices accordingly. We are proud to serve America's Veterans and committed to providing excellent care every single time.*



### CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the Poplar Bluff region is making progress with regard to customer service at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center. This Summary Report provides continuing accountability and transparency of veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities and offers ideas for moving forward. The veterans who filled out the survey provided honest, constructive information regarding their experiences at the VA medical facilities during their recent visits. With this information, we compiled a summary report that reflects veterans' experiences and concerns with these facilities.

The VA's Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients Report provides the VA with a general overview of veterans' overall quality of care. Alternatively, the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey provides the VA with some specific examples of the quality of the veterans' customer service experiences at the Poplar Bluff VA facilities.

Efforts to improve veterans' experiences regarding customer service at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center are underway, and progress will continue toward increasingly positive results. The VA has continued to provide responses that indicate they are taking veterans' concerns seriously and are implementing procedures to streamline the deficiencies that veterans have identified using the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. The implementation of a call center for ease of scheduling, increased number of personal, improved communication between veterans and doctors, and additional informational resources for veterans will enable the Poplar Bluff VA to better respond to veterans' needs and provide them with the high quality customer service they are rightfully due.

In order to maintain the momentum we have achieved thus far, we need to continue working together in order to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue filling out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program is critical to the success of the program. The senate office will compile the summary reports and the VA Medical Center's responses on an annual basis.

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